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ABSTRACT

This paper provides guidelines for establishing a parliamentary research service. The following steps are described: (1) establish a robust democracy as the context for the parliamentary research service; (2) counter alternatives to a parliamentary research service, e.g., personal staff, party-based research, university contacts, interest groups, Departments of State, and the Internet; (3) negotiate the resource base, i.e., necessary staff and funding to provide anticipated services; (4) examine other models in order to assess which is most appropriate; (5) develop a client-oriented culture; (6) establish an optimum relationship with the parliamentary library; (7) forge strategic links with academics, officials, and interest group representatives; and (8) recruit the best and the brightest analysts. The conclusion offers specific recommendations for building a parliamentary research service. (MES)

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# How to establish a parliamentary research service: does one size fit all?

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## Paper

### 1. Establish a robust democracy!

Anyone who plans to establish a Parliamentary Research Service should first look around them and assess the context in which they are to do so. Is there a robust democracy in which governments are regularly replaced by oppositions and is there tolerance of opposition in its many shapes and forms? Are members of parliament freely and fairly elected, reasonably well educated and committed to the role of Parliament as a primary means to hold governments accountable? Is the polity one in which there is a free flow of information and ready access to that information? If not, first establish your robust democracy!

There is undoubtedly a clear - and understandable - correlation between the existence of strong quality research services and the stage of political development that countries have achieved. Here I refer you to an earlier paper presented to IFLA in which I argued that a research service can develop only in tandem with the status of its parliament.[1] But when the debate starts, as it surely will among members keen to develop their role as parliamentarians, it will also include preferred alternatives.

### 2. Counter the inevitable alternatives

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**Personal staff**
Especially in circumstances in which they have no - or very little support in their own offices - many members, given the choice, will understandably opt for assistance here in the first instance. This is the point at which to argue that one or two individual dedicated staff, no matter how earnest, intelligent and hard working, cannot possibly hope to compete with a group of research specialists trained to provide advice in a parliamentary context, especially when the role of personal staff will necessarily be so much broader.

**Party based research**
Remember, too, the inevitable suspicion and scepticism about a research service that will exist in some quarters at the outset. There will always be doubts that an independent group of researchers, working to all members of parliament, can and will provide impartial and confidential advice that members can rely on. This could lead to an argument that therefore this additional support would be best provided through establishment or supplementation of party based research resources, as is the case in New Zealand, for example. The counter argument is that party based research remains party based research, i.e. that it is unlikely to be objective and most likely to put only one side of the case.

**University contacts**
Yet others will argue that research support can be found in the universities (as was the case in Australia before the establishment of the research service in 1966, when in the absence of an alternative, strong relationships were built up with the Australian National University). And this is the point at which to spell out the difference between often long, ponderous and slowly produced research which, for traditional and training reasons, is less geared to the political or practical context of the question. Moreover, while such research and such contacts remain an essential adjunct to an optimum research service, they are unlikely to produce that service as efficiently as those trained for it.

**Interests groups**
Some members may argue that they get all the information they need from interest groups which bombard them with literature and delegations and invitations. But interest groups remain interest groups, providing lots of information and advice for sure but, obviously, information and advice couched in terms of the interests of the group concerned. This cannot compete with access to independent and objective advice provided by an independent objective parliamentary research service. (A regular request of our analysts is that the so-and-so industry has put such-and-such a position to me. Can you give me an assessment of the merits of their case?)

**Departments of State**
Governments may argue that a research service is not needed because members can seek briefings from departments of state. As in the case of interests groups, however, this source too, inevitably, is committed to providing advice couched in terms of the policies of the government of the day. That this is well understood is illustrated in Australia by some cases of ministers seeking the independent advice that a research service can provide in terms of 'my Department is telling me this. What do you think?'

**The Internet**
It is clear how little understood the Internet still is when so many people,

politicians among them, wonder why parliamentary libraries, or even research services, are necessary when there is Internet. Internet is a brilliant tool which makes for a much higher level of self-help among parliamentarians which can leave highly qualified librarians and analysts free to focus on the more complex value-added work than was once the case. However, while the Internet has changed dramatically the volume and speed of access to information, the traditional library skills of searching, sifting and sorting, and analyst skills of synthesising and assessing, remain as essential as ever in a world confronted by exponential information overload. The fascinating challenge, in particular for the parliamentary library industry, presented with this brilliant new tool, is to become the most efficient searchers, sifters and sorters. And the challenge for analysts remains as it always was - to make sense of all that is known and to do so in a fashion that can be easily absorbed by the busy member who is unlikely himself/herself to be an expert in the subject under consideration.

## 3. Negotiate the resource base

A clear statement of the resource commitment to - and expectation of - the new endeavour must be made. The person charged with the responsibility of establishing the research service, must make it plain to his/her political masters that if 'x' services are anticipated, then 'y' dollars and 'z' staff will be required to deliver them. Funding for a minimum technical support base, from adequate photocopying facilities to access to the Internet, must also be agreed.

The notion of 'critical mass' should be put on the table. As a minimum, a research service must have the capacity to deliver a legislative analysis service, an economic analysis service and a statistical service[2], each with at least two staff. Here it is useful to note Bruce Davidson's 1999 IFLA presentation to the Special Research Meeting on the implications of offering a research service with a staff of two. He concluded that the expectation created by access to a research services was simply too great and that with the resources available, a research service could not, in fact, be delivered at all.

Resourcing the creation of a new parliamentary research service must be a separate and additional commitment to funds already allocated to the parliamentary library. If this cannot be achieved, it is doubtful that there is sufficient commitment at the relevant levels to the enterprise and thus equally doubtful that it will succeed. Just as importantly, if resources for a research service are hived off from an existing parliamentary library this cannot but be the worst possible start for what is a critically important relationship

I sometimes wonder to what degree the tension between so many parliamentary research services and parliamentary libraries stems not only from poor communication about the complementarity (and not competitiveness) of their roles, but from an early competition for resources.

## 4. Examine other models

Before concluding what kind of research service should be developed, examine the models, with both organisation and output in mind, to assess which is most appropriate in your country's context.

Is Canada's marriage of the research function with committee support, which capitalises on economies of shared expertise in its research service and its committees possible? Or, for structural reasons, do you have to remain stuck with the less efficient Australian model where these functions are carried out in entirely separate departments? Is Australia's model of combined librarian and analyst subject teams an option? Is the research service's charter to be limited to the provision of general briefs for all parliamentarians or to include the provision of individual advice on request from individual MPs (Australia does more of the latter, the US more of the former)? Is the client base to include constituent work (as in the UK) or not (as in the case of Australia)?

With the resource base in mind, establish a hierarchy of services (products), bearing in mind both the experience of other parliaments and local conditions. Very early on in the life of the research service, development of a Statement of Client Entitlements, clearly setting out who is entitled to what services when, will greatly assist staff focus service on agreed priorities.

## 5. Develop a client oriented culture

We all need to remind ourselves regularly that parliamentary libraries and research services exist for the sole purpose of assisting members in their parliamentary and representational roles. This means that they are not traditional libraries developing comprehensive collections nor universities producing original research and writing lengthy erudite papers that no one has time to read. It also means accepting as core business the requirements of client focus first and foremost.

Having secured the active, proselytising support of the highest official of the Parliament (usually the Speaker or, in Australia's case, the Speaker and the President of the Senate), take your future clients, the parliamentarians', interests into account. Seek Mr Speaker's endorsement of extensive consultation with MPs to discuss the role and objectives of the service and how it will complement that already provided by the parliamentary library. Seek their views on priority products (individual confidential briefs versus general papers prepared to assist all members, options for oral briefings and for electronic delivery of service). Seek their views on the direction of recruitment to reflect their core interests. For example in both Zimbabwe and Fiji, where Australia has been invited to assist with the development of parliamentary research services, recruitment of an agricultural economist was identified as a top priority given the economic base of both countries.

Keep the dialogue going by developing rigorous and regular feedback mechanisms,[3] both to promote the new services and to assess their relevance in both form and impact. Most importantly, be willing to adjust and change.

Part of the building up of trust will come from delivering vital but 'safe' services to MPs in the first instance and those most likely to build up an

early habit of use.

## 6. Establish optimum relationship with the Parliamentary Library

Most parliamentary research services will be established when members of parliament recognise that they need more - or a different kind of - assistance than librarians can provide, that is that they want more processing or analysis of information. If the parliamentary library has been established as a parliamentary library, i.e. service oriented rather than collection oriented, and not as a traditional collecting library, they will already have had access to a current awareness service (a broad range of files subject selected and chronologically organised from newspapers, named items from journals, Hansards, press releases, committee reports and any other publicly available source updated daily). They will also have come to expect new acquisitions notifications and bibliographies, or other searches prepared on request.

If a parliamentary library service of this sort is not already working efficiently, it needs to be assisted to do so. An effective parliamentary research service must be able to rely on the services on an effective parliamentary library as a primary resource and, importantly, so that its energies are not diverted to perform a role it is not, in any case, particularly well qualified to do.

The importance of the relationship between a parliamentary library and a parliamentary research service cannot be overestimated. There needs to be a clear identification of their separate roles, recognition and respect for the two different professions involved, including through equitable remuneration, and an on-going dialogue about the best ways to deliver services across a spectrum which can, in some ways be seen to be a continuum of service.

## 7. Forge strategic links

The mission of a parliamentary research service is to provide the best possible advice in the time available to members of parliament. In its early days, and even when it becomes a well-endowed service, it will never have, in-house, all the expertise at the one time that could possibly be required by its clients. To compensate, all of its staff must develop networks in the professions and specialisations they represent for, in the course of meeting members' needs, they will need recourse to academics, officials and interest group representatives.

In the Australian case approximately 20 academics may be commissioned each year to write stock research papers in areas where a need is identified which cannot be met. Departments of State are called upon regularly for assistance in providing the latest information about government policies in the full knowledge that our evaluation of such policies will not always be positive. And interest groups, of course, provide a vital perspective on one side of the story in question.

Strategic partnerships can be particularly effective in embryonic research

services to draw on expertise it cannot (yet) hope to provide for itself.

If the Parliamentary Library is a separate institution, it will be a primary partner and, in the ideal world, will have built a primary link with the National Library. In Australia, the creation of a National Library as a separate institution out of the Parliamentary Library by Act of Parliament in 1960, leaving the Parliamentary Library with first call on its resources, has enabled the Parliamentary Library to shed the collecting responsibilities of a national library and focus entirely on becoming an effective, value-adding parliamentary library.

## 8. Recruit the best and the brightest ...analysts

Because of the different services each provides, and because of the different professional backgrounds of librarians and researchers, recruitment for the research service will not, and should not, usually come from the library. The very best and brightest will not, either, usually be new graduates. Rather a research service should seek out staff with more worldly exposure than to the university who will offer highly developed analytical skills, excellent communication and interpersonal skills appropriate to a parliamentary environment and to a client service. They will also be able to demonstrate integrity, judgement, initiative, flexibility and maturity. And, very importantly, because of the shifting sands of parliamentary issues and interests, they will be willing and able to develop other areas of expertise as required.

## 9. Conclusions

I cannot emphasise strongly enough the fact that when it comes to developing services of any kind for different parliaments, one size certainly does not fit all. There is no template for the development of a parliamentary research service. That said, given the opportunity to build a research service from scratch, **I would recommend:**

- the Canadian model of including research for committees in the role of the research service
- the Australian model of combined professional teams (but all co-located)
- the US model of apparently unlimited resources (huge!) including for succession planning
- the Australian model of priority commitment to individual client work
- the Zimbabwe model of 600%+ commitment and support from the Speaker of the Parliament
- the US model of staff assessment and development.

**I would NOT recommend:**

- the physical separation of the parliamentary library and research service as in Canada or its institutional separation as in Germany
- inclusion of constituent work as in UK
- creation of duplicate library resources/services as (at last look) in the US and in Zimbabwe.
- falling below a minimum critical mass of 6 or 7 as in Norway, New Zealand and Victoria (Australia).

Whatever the model, effective services, however, are more likely to be developed by those with an intelligent ear to the political ground, good negotiating and networking skills, and a flexible and common sense approach. This includes a recognition that before you can run you must first learn to walk and this means a fairly cautious approach to product, at least any public product, until the confidence of clients has been built up. To establish a research service's credentials with both the government and the opposition may take years as it did in Australia's case. It can be argued that it was not until the Liberal-National party came to spend 13 years in opposition (from 1983 to 1996) that its members, too, came to appreciate fully the value of access to independent research services, especially for the Opposition front bench. And yet there remains the requirement for vigilance as new members replace old and, in this adversary environment, the cycle of suspicion can start again.

## Notes

1. J.R.Verrier, *The Future of Parliamentary Research Services: To Lead or to Follow*, IFLA, Istanbul 1995.

2. Evidence suggests that most research services begin by offering these services, i.e. the ones most obviously necessary to assist MPs in their immediate parliamentary duties of contributing to legislative debate and to scrutiny of the budget.

3. The Australian Parliamentary Information and Research Service has five well developed client feedback mechanisms, a triennial External Client Services Survey, a 'Bouquet and Brickbats' (client Initiated Feedback) Database, a program of individual calls on Senators and Members by the Head and Deputy head, regular (usually quarterly) client for an annual invitation to parliamentarians representing the major parties to address a full staff meeting. For a fuller account of these, see J R Verrier, Seminar on Comparative Legislative Research services Ottowa, Canada, 2 April 1998: *Australian Parliamentary Information and Research Services Approaches to Client Feedback.*

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